

THE TECHNIQUES AND INSTRUMENTS BY WHICH THE COMMUNISTS
BROUGHT ABOUT THE AGREEMENTS OF AUGUST, 1956

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THE TECHNIQUES AND INSTRUMENTS BY WHICH THE COMMUNISTS BROUGHT ABOUT THE AGREEMENTS OF AUGUST, 1956

Creation of the Pathet Lao as a Communist Instrument

1. The origins of the Pathet Lao movement, as described above, are a typical example of the creation by the Communists of an ostensibly indigenous, pseudo-nationalist movement as a Communist instrument for the eventual establishment of a Communist government in a hitherto non-Communist country. The handful of dissident nationalists led by Prince Souphanouvong would, by themselves, have created no problem for the RLG. Only the political and organizational skill and the military strength of the Vietminh made the Pathet Lao into an organization which could maintain a successful insurrection, win quasi-recognition from an international conference, and finally negotiate on equal terms with the legally constituted government of their country. It is perhaps not necessary for the purposes of this paper to point out how the capabilities of the Vietminh themselves are the creation of Communist China.

Exploitation of Nationalist Feeling and War-weariness

2. As in many other formerly colonial countries, the nationalist issue in Laos was real. The dissident element now being exploited by Communism began as members of a nationalist resistance against French colonialism. It is difficult for non-Communist leaders to believe that old comrades-in-arms have really become convinced Communists. The Communists find this sentiment easy to exploit. When Pathet Lao leaders appeal to old comrades saying, in effect, "Why are we, who fought together against the French, shooting each other?--We both want the same thing--independence for Laos, and have differed only on methods--why can't we get together again?"--it is difficult for the non-Communist nationalists to resist.

After their experience of Japanese occupation, World War II, anti-French resistance and Communist-inspired civil war, the people and Government of Laos are war-weary. In their desire to put an end to internal conflict and get on with the business of lifting the country out of its backwardness and improving the lot of the people, they are extremely vulnerable to the tactics of the Communist Pathet Lao which seem to promise an end to the insecurities and the problems of civil war and a peaceful reunification of the country.

It was against this favorable background that the Communists of the DRV and the CPR, speaking through the Pathet Lao, proceeded to organize and maneuver all available assets inside and outside of Laos, to bring about an agreement from which they could proceed, along new tactical lines, toward their ultimate objective; the detachment of Laos from the West and her alignment with the Communist bloc.

The Role of the International Control Commission

3. The Geneva agreements had created an International Control Commission (ICC) to oversee the carrying out of the agreements in Laos. This Commission included a delegate from a Communist country, Poland, one from a Western country, Canada, and a chairman, Mr. Samar Sen, from a neutral country, India, to balance and coordinate the presumably often opposing views of the other two. The rule of unanimity prevailed which made the formulation of any positive policy by the ICC difficult.

In such circumstances, Communist members of international commissions have often regarded it as their function to protect and promote the interests of the Communist party to the dispute. If this has been less evident during the negotiations between the Pathet Lao and the RLG, it is perhaps due to the fact that the views of the Indian chairman of the ICC often paralleled those of the Pathet Lao and made it unnecessary for the Polish delegate to take the initiative.

Nevertheless, the role of the Communist delegate in influencing events favorably for the Pathet Lao was not entirely abdicated. That radio communication between the Pathet Lao in Vientiane and the Communists in Hanoi existed was indicated by the immediate broadcast by the Hanoi radio of the Burchett interview and of the joint communiques. It was generally believed that radio facilities possessed by the Polish ICC delegate were at the disposal of the Pathet Lao for this purpose.

On the occasion of the mission of Wilfred Burchett to Vientiane, he spent a good deal of time with the Polish ICC delegate, although just what may have been involved in the way of reporting, briefing or instructions is not known.

In January, 1956, the ICC issued a resolution urging the restoration of RLG authority in the two northern provinces, but laid down no procedures for the implementation of this decision of the Geneva Conference.

From even this relatively innocuous action the Polish delegate abstained. Presumably any stronger action on this question by the ICC would have met with his veto.

4. The ICC has, as a result of the tactics of the Polish delegate and the neutralism of the Indian chairman, been unable to play a positive role in the settlement of the Pathet Lao-RLG problem. It has been unable to influence the Pathet Lao to comply with the Geneva decision restoring RLG authority in the two provinces, while urging political concession relating to the legalization and integration of the Pathet Lao upon the Government--concessions paralleling very closely the demands of the Pathet Lao themselves.

The overall effect of the ICC position in Laos has, as a consequence of these factors, been to weaken the position of the Government vis-a-vis the Pathet Lao and therefore to contribute to a settlement by which the Communists have made important gains.

The Shadow of the DRV and the CPR Over the Negotiations

5. Behind the Pathet Lao throughout the negotiations with the RLG stood the DRV and China. The Pathet Lao had been created in the first place by the intervention of the Vietminh and was still dependent upon them. The influence of the CPR and the DRV were used to the fullest to induce the RLG to enter negotiations and then to accept terms satisfactory to the Communist side.

Perhaps most important in this respect was the potential threat of a new Vietminh military intervention. The RLG was aware that the Vietminh probably had the military capacity to overrun Laos unless SEATO or Western aid was invoked, in which case Laos might become another Korea. The Peiping radio even dropped occasional veiled hints of possible CPR intervention if the "threat to peace" represented by the Pathet Lao/RLG conflict was not resolved. The RLG had to bear constantly in mind this possible consequence of a failure to reach a settlement with the Pathet Lao.

Peiping and Hanoi radio propaganda was also utilized to support both the idea of negotiation and the Pathet Lao position. These broadcasts endeavored to mobilize public opinion in Laos in favor of a settlement and to convince other countries, particularly the uncommitted neutrals of Asia, that only the intransigence of the RLG due to American influence stood in the way of a quick settlement and an end to the guerrilla war.

The Communist Approach and RLG Reactions in View of the New International Line

6. As has been described above, the negotiations between the Pathet Lao and the RLG had reached a stalemate by the end of 1955. However, with the development of the new international line, a basis for a fresh approach was provided. The Pathet Lao were now able to recognize the independence of the RLG and to approve its neutral foreign policy even though still disapproving its acceptance of Western aid. The denunciations of the RLG as a "tool" and a "lackey" of imperialism could be mitigated. On their side, RLG officials who had become discouraged over the possibility of negotiation with the Pathet Lao could now tell themselves, in view of the new international Communist appearance, that the Communists had changed and that perhaps negotiation could succeed now in spite of its failure in the past.

Outside Communist Assistance for the Pathet Lao

7. After the breakdown of negotiations in late 1955 the decision of the RLG to go ahead with elections and organization of the government without the Pathet Lao left the latter in a somewhat embarrassing position. The indefinite continuance of a situation in which they were confined to the two provinces, restrained by Geneva from a new Viet-minh-backed military adventure and outlawed as a party in the rest of Laos was not at all to their liking. The new international line made it incumbent upon them to seek legalization and avenues for political action as a substitute for armed struggle.

But to approach the RLG for new negotiations without some assurances of a favorable reception would be to invite an embarrassing snub and consequent loss of face for the Pathet Lao and would be taken in many quarters as a confession of weakness. Even to seek such assurances directly would involve similar risks.

Here they were aided by the appearance on the scene of international Communist journalist Wilfred Burchett who visited Vientiane and, through the device of an interview with Souvanna Phouma, was able to determine that the RLG would be receptive to proposals for reopening of negotiations and that it would not be impossibly demanding in the way of terms. The world Communism movement was thus able to intervene to extricate the Pathet Lao from the dilemma in which the breakdown of negotiations had left them.

Exploitation of Internal Tensions in Laos by the Communists

8. There were in Laos, even in the RLG, elements which favored early settlement of the Pathet Lao question even at the cost of considerable concessions. Some of this feeling was on the part of individuals genuinely unconvinced of the Communist nature of the Pathet Lao and its ties to the DRV and the Communist bloc. Such people deplored the fratricidal war and the diversion of Laotian resources from reconstruction and development and felt that internal peace was of the first priority. The Communists had not created this element, nor did they control it, but they were aware of it and exploited its sentiments to the fullest.

But there were other internal factions pressing the RLG towards settlement whose motives and connections were less disinterested. Opportunist politicians were ready to seize upon the Pathet Lao issue, as upon any other which might present itself, to embarrass the RLG and thus advance their own personal ambitions. The opposition party led by Bong Souvannavong in part answered this description. Possibly a crypto-Communist, or at least a fellow-traveller, Bong had continually urged a softer policy towards the Pathet Lao. He represented a threat to Souvanna Phouma's government. Under certain circumstances he might be part of a coalition which could overturn the government in a more or less constitutional fashion. He was already accused of being the moving spirit in a plot for a rebellion and military coup in cooperation with the Pathet Lao and, possibly, Prince Petsarath, which would exclude both Souvanna Phouma and Katay from the government and install a pro-Communist regime. The longer the stalemate lasted and the Souvanna Phouma government demonstrated its inability to reach a settlement, the stronger Bong's position became.

It is impossible to say to what extent Bong was a conscious instrument of the Pathet Lao and directed by them in exerting pressure upon the RLG. But his position was certainly a factor in urging the RLG towards a settlement with the Pathet Lao.

9. Something of the same characterization applies to the influence of Prince Petsarath from his exile in Bangkok. He has believed in the essentially nationalist character of the Pathet Lao movement and has urged concessions by the RLG for the sake of an agreement. His great prestige with all groups in Laos, including Souvanna Phouma himself, made his opinions significant and, of course, he represented a possible alternative to Souvanna as Prime Minister, should the latter fail to reach agreement with the Pathet Lao.

These pressures could not fail to influence the RLG in its decision to reopen negotiations and perhaps to make whatever concession were necessary to secure Pathet Lao agreement. The Pathet Lao, and behind them the DRV, were aware of this situation and doing whatever their capacities permitted to manipulate these pressures and forces to bring about the kind of a settlement which they wanted.

Communists Utilize and Exploit All Available Techniques and Assets to Bring about a Favorable Agreement

10. We have in this episode a picture of a planned and purposeful maneuver in which the Communists have used and exploited every possible asset, some controlled and some fortuitous, to bring about a desired end. It may safely be assumed that the joint communiques and whatever agreements come out of the mixed commissions do not represent for the Communists the end result of this maneuver. Undoubtedly they have already envisioned the further stages which will lead to the final goal, the Communization of Laos.

From the creation of the Pathet Lao movement as a Communist instrument, utilizing a dissident Free Lao group, the Communists have skillfully analyzed and manipulated the factors and forces involved to bring about their desired result. The natural sentiments of the Laotian people, --nationalism, war-weariness, desire for security, etc., --have been capitalized upon. The political and military power of neighboring Communist countries has been invoked, sometimes directly and sometimes as a veiled threat. Agents of the international movement have stepped into the picture to play a brief but essential role. Allies inside the opposition camp, whether controlled assets or groups whose aims for the moment coincide with Communist policy, have been mobilized to pressure the opponent, in this case the RLG, in the desired direction. Opportunities on the level of international diplomacy such as afforded by the Geneva Conference, the Bandung Conference, and the ICC have been exploited for Communist purposes. In the end, as a result of the manipulation and utilization of a variety of forces and factors, an agreement resulted which gives the Communist side most of what they wanted and provides them with a legal position from which they can extend their influence.